A Research Review on Social Media Addiction and Loneliness

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Abstract:

Background: Adolescents spend considerable time on smartphones for various purposes such as studying and socializing, making it essential for them to understand the optimal use of social media. However, when a student struggles to manage their use of these platforms, it can lead to internet addiction, which negatively impacts their physical, psychological, and social well-being.

Purpose: This study aims to explore the relationship between social media usage and loneliness.

Design: The research reviewed correlational studies to examine this connection.

Findings: The review revealed a strong positive correlation between social media addiction and loneliness.

Implications: The findings can guide psychologists and health professionals in developing prevention and intervention strategies. Those who experience negative impacts from social media use may benefit from targeted counseling and coping strategies.

Recommendations: It is recommended that the risks and causes of social media addiction be incorporated into educational curricula, along with strategies to mitigate its harmful effects on physical, psychological, and social health.

Conclusion: The study concluded that social media use disorder, along with symptoms of depression and stress, is linked to higher levels of loneliness.

Keywords: Loneliness, smartphone addiction, Social media addiction, Isolation, Depression

I. INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, social media platforms have revolutionized the way individuals connect, communicate, and share experiences. However, the pervasive use of social media has also given rise to significant concerns, particularly concerning its impact on psychological well-being. Social media addiction, characterized by extreme and uncontrollable engagement with platforms, has emerged as a growing phenomenon, with implications for mental health and interpersonal relationships.

One of the paradoxical outcomes of increased social media practice is its association with emotional state of loneliness. Despite being designed to enhance social connectivity, excessive reliance on social media may undermine meaningful face-to-face interactions, foster feelings of inadequacy through social comparison, and contribute to a sense of social isolation. This paradox warrants a closer examination of the connection between social media addiction and loneliness. People turn to social media to alleviate loneliness, seeking connection and validation. Social media addiction and loneliness are complex, interconnected issues that require a multifaceted approach involving individuals, communities, and technology designers. By fostering awareness, setting boundaries, and emphasizing genuine connections, it is possible to mitigate the negative effects and promote healthier digital habits.

II. SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION

Social media addiction is a behavioural phenomenon characterized by excessive and uncontrollable use of social networking daises such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, and others. While these platforms can facilitate communication, entertainment, and education, overuse can lead to negative social, mental, and physical consequences. This behavioral addiction shares similarities with substance abuse disorders in terms of dependence, withdrawal, and compulsive engagement. Social media addiction is strongly linked to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, and low life satisfaction. These findings highlight how excessive usage can impair well-being and exacerbate emotional distress.

Kuss and Griffiths (2017) found that frequently comparing oneself to others on social media can lead to negative emotional outcomes. Additionally, the endless scrolling through feeds can create a sense of fear of missing out (FOMO), which may lead individuals to stay on social media for extended periods, even when it is detrimental to their mental health. Study by Rosen et al. (2013) suggests that frequent social media checking during work hours can significantly distract individuals and diminish their ability to focus on tasks. Another study by Twenge et al. (2017) identified a connection between extensive social media use and higher rates of depression and suicide among teenagers. Social media addiction may contribute to sleep deprivation, as many users stay up late engaging with content, leading to a disrupted circadian rhythm and further exacerbating mental health issues. According to a study by Alter (2017)**,** social media's design is akin to a "slot machine," where users are constantly seeking new stimuli, making it hard to stop engaging. The craving for validation through likes and comments can result in compulsive behavior, especially among younger people.

Social media addiction is a growing concern in today's digitally connected world, affecting mental health, relationships, and productivity. While social media offers significant benefits, its excessive use can lead to various challenges.

III.   LONELINESS

Loneliness is a complex and multifaceted emotional experience that can affect people in different ways. It is often described as the feeling of being disconnected or isolated from others, whether physically or emotionally. The experience of loneliness can vary in intensity, ranging from a fleeting feeling of disconnection to deep, chronic emotional distress. It can be triggered by various reasons, such as the loss of a valued one, moving to a new place, social rejection, or even modern technology and social media, which can create a paradoxical sense of isolation despite being constantly "connected." Loneliness has significant implications for mental and physical health.

Research shows that prolonged loneliness can contribute to feelings of depression, anxiety, and even affect cardiovascular health. Psychologically, loneliness is understood as a subjective feeling of social isolation. Even in crowded environments, a person may experience loneliness if they don't feel connected to others. It's distinguished from being physically alone, as loneliness can occur even in a group setting if there is emotional disconnection. A study published in Nature Human Behaviour in January 2025 found that social isolation and loneliness are linked to increased levels of proteins related to inflammation. This inflammation predisposes individuals to diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and even early death.

IV.   SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION AND LONELINESS

Primack et al. (2017) exposed that spending more time on social media is linked with a higher likelihood of experiencing social isolation. Similarly, Fardouly et al. (2015) found that regular exposure to idealized images on social media correlates with reduced self-esteem and heightened loneliness. Research by Shensa et al. (2017**)** suggests that chronic loneliness can even increase the likelihood of developing social media addiction as individuals seek out digital interactions to fill the emotional void left by inadequate offline relationships. Research by Keles et al. (2020) showed that excessive use of platforms like Instagram and Snap chat exacerbates loneliness, especially in young adults. Research by Orben et al. (2019**)** suggests the relationship is not strictly linear; moderate use of social media may reduce loneliness for individuals who lack offline social networks.

Longitudinal studies reveal that prolonged overuse of social media can deteriorate mental health and increase loneliness over time (Huang, 2022). A longitudinal study by Hunt et al. (2018) demonstrated that restricting social media use to 30 minutes per day notably decreased loneliness and depression in young adults. Andreassen et al. (2012**)** highlighted that individuals with social media addiction often report heightened loneliness, as addictive behaviors disrupt real-world relationships and deepen social isolation. Baker & Algorta (2016**)** found that the purpose of social media use plays a critical role, with goal-oriented interaction reducing loneliness. Hou et al. (2019**)** demonstrated that interventions targeting self-regulation in social media use significantly reduced loneliness among participants.

Shaw and Gant (2002**)** pointed out that individuals who feel socially isolated may turn to online interactions to compensate for a lack of real-world social connections. Turel et al. (2011) found that loneliness could intensify the desire for social approval on social media platforms, creating a cycle where users become dependent on digital interactions to alleviate their feelings of loneliness. A meta-analysis by Dhir et al. (2018**)** also supports the notion that social media addiction can lead to loneliness, noting that excessive use can disrupt real-life relationships, thus

contributing to feelings of social disconnectedness. Shapiro (2018) emphasized that social media might not provide the emotional depth of face-to-face relationships, and over-reliance on it can exacerbate feelings of isolation and loneliness. Research by Tiggemann & Slater (2014) explored how young adults practise social media to compare themselves to others, often experiencing feelings of **i**nferiorit**y** or loneliness when they feel their lives do not measure up to the curated posts of their peers.

Research by Verduyn et al. (2015) indicated that **active** social media use (e.g., interacting with friends) may have less negative effects on loneliness compared to **passive** use (e.g., scrolling through posts or viewing photos). Valkenburg and Peter (2011) found that adolescents who spent more time on social networking sites were more prone to reporting feelings of loneliness**.** Kross et al. (2013) suggest that taking breaks from social media can lead to improved emotional well-being and reduced feelings of loneliness.

Social media addiction and loneliness are deeply intertwined, creating a cycle that can harm mental health and well-being. However, by fostering healthy digital habits and prioritizing meaningful, offline relationships, individuals can mitigate these effects and use social media in a balanced, constructive way.

V.   IMPLICATIONS

1. This research can be used for campaigns to promote effectively social media use and awareness of its psychological impacts.
2. It can empower users to self-regulate their habits. This research can be used for Educating users about the risks of passive consumption and social comparison.
3. Educating people on the impact of social media and promoting mind-full usage could strengthen real-world relationships and reduce dependence on virtual interactions.
4. Insights from such studies can help individuals recognize symptoms of addiction or loneliness and motivate them to seek therapy or support groups.
5. Used for Digital Detox Programs. It Encourage temporary disconnection to recalibrate users' relationship with social media.
6. Findings could encourage more research into the causal relationship between social media use and loneliness, exploring factors such as age, gender, and cultural differences.

VI.   LIMITATION OF STUDY

1. Without longitudinal or experimental designs, it's unclear whether loneliness leads to social media addiction.
2. Review findings might not be applicable across diverse demographic groups or in varied social contexts, reducing the external validity of findings.
3. This research focuses on correlational relationships between loneliness and social media addiction without addressing underlying psychological processes, such as emotional regulation or self-esteem.
4. Cultural differences in social media use and emotional expression are often overlooked in studies on loneliness and social media addiction. Cultural norms around expression and the role of social media may influence how these two variables relate.

VII.   CONCLUSION

In conclusion, study highlights a significant relationship between social media addiction and feelings of loneliness. The existing body of research reveals a complex and often bidirectional relationship between social media addiction and loneliness. While social media platforms are designed to foster connectivity, excessive or maladaptive use is consistently associated with increased feelings of loneliness, reduced real-life social interactions, and poor psychological well-being. Factors such as age, personality traits, type of platform used, and purpose of usage significantly moderate this relationship.

Although some studies suggest that social media can alleviate loneliness by providing virtual social support, the overall trend indicates that compulsive or addictive usage patterns tend to exacerbate feelings of isolation. This paradox highlights the need for balanced and mindful engagement with social media. Future research should adopt longitudinal and experimental designs to clarify causality and explore intervention strategies. Educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers must collaborate to promote digital literacy and emotional resilience, helping individuals use social media as a tool for connection rather than a crutch for emotional fulfilment.

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